

# Visual Primes and EU Identity: Designing Experimental Research

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## Introduction

There has been considerable attention paid to the role of symbols in forging identification with and support for the European Union (Bruter 2003, 2009; Laffan 1996; Manners 2011; McLaren 2006; Shore 2000). Detailed empirical analysis is still, however, required of the following: i) the extent to which such symbols carry implicit messages about European Union identity; ii) the type of messages that different symbols convey; iii) the effect that exposure to these symbols in different contexts might have on political preferences. The authors employed an experimental approach to establish the extent to which implicit visual reminders of EU membership, from images of ceremonial flags to more mundane, functional symbols (like passports and driving licences), prime particular - affective or instrumental - associations, and how these associations may shape EU-related attitudes.

Our motivation came from Billig's (1995: 59) observation that: 'no one asks how many stars and stripes the average American is likely to encounter in the course of the day. Nor what is the effect of all this flagging.' Our analysis sought to measure the effect of visual cues that prime the EU on attitudes to the European Union. This chapter discusses the theoretical puzzle addressed, the details of the research design, the contribution of this approach to

our understanding of the nature and consequences of EU identity and potential further applications of this type of experimental approach in the field of EU studies.

## **A. Problem and Theoretical Background**

Three key concerns underpin our research agenda. First, how do individuals and groups learn to identify with the European Union? Second, what role do symbols such as flags play in this process? Third, how do the different contexts in which EU symbols are presented to the public, and alternative, coexisting conceptualisations of the European Union, moderate the effect of exposure to EU related symbols?

### Identification with the European Union

The prospect of a post-national EU identity has generated considerable scholarly interest (see Bruter 2003, 2005, 2009; Carey 2002; Diez Medrano 2003, 2008; Herrmann et al. 2004; Checkel & Katzenstein 2009; Citrin & Sides 2004; Delanty 1995; Fligstein 2008; Fossum 2003; Green 2007; Habermas 1992; Habermas 2006; Hooghe & Marks 2008; Laffan 1996; McLaren 2006; Risse 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2010; Shore, 2000). As Hooghe and Marks (2008: 23) note, however, the study of EU identity suffers from an ‘incomplete account of the construction of identity’ and lacks clear hypotheses concerning ‘the relative causal weight of identity’ in the European integration process.

Identity is not always passionate or heroic. It may also be mundane, even banal (Billig 1995) and absorbed unconsciously (Gellner 1997: 94). The learning of 'integrative habits' was recognised by Mitrany (1943), Deutsch (1953, 1966; Deutsch et al. 1957) and (Haas 1958) to be an important element of European integration. Referring to the national context, Billig (1995: 43) similarly argued that it is routines and habits which act as daily reminders of belonging and which create a sense of 'homeland'.

The concept of *banal Europeanism* emphasises the normalisation of European Union membership experienced by its citizens: the process of 'inventing a people' for the European Union through everyday exposure to EU related reminders. Central to this approach is the largely implicit, even sub-conscious, process through which the EU citizens, subjected to daily low-level reminders, learn that they belong to the European Union (Cram 2001, 2006, 2012).

### Flagging the European Union

The attachment of evocative symbols to instrumental benefits is central to understanding how ongoing and sustained identification with a political authority is generated. Deutsch (1966: 170), for example, argued that such communications and symbols were central to an understanding of the emergence of a 'national consciousness'.

The interplay between interest and identity in the development and maintenance of political communities has long been recognised. For example, Almond and Verba (1963) analyse how both the affective and evaluative dimensions of political engagement contribute to the creation of the 'civic culture'. Central to the development of identification with the political regime is the extent to which functional benefits, whether material or otherwise, become attached to meaningful symbols or signifiers of attachment to the relevant political unit such that these symbols resonate with the public and become capable of mobilising 'national', or in this case, 'EU' sentiment.

Considerable attention has been paid to the role played by symbols in forging a European Union identity (Bruter 2003, 2009; Cram 2001; 2012; Laffan 1996; Manners 2011; McLaren 2006; Shore 2000). Detailed analysis of the extent to which secondary symbols, carrying implicit messages about European Union identity, become attached to daily events and patterns of communication amongst the various European people(s) is still, however, required. More specifically, there is little understanding of the effect that such visual reminders have on the attitudes, or the behaviour, of EU citizens.

### The Contested European Union

An extensive literature charts the complexities of the interacting identities within the EU (see, for example: Diez Medrano and Gutiérrez (2010), on 'nested identities'; Laitin (1998) on 'layered identities'; Risse (2003, 2004, and 2010) on the 'marble cake' model; Citrin and Sides (2004), on 'hybrid' identities; and Ichijo and Spohn (2005), on 'entangled' identities).

There is a growing body of literature which draws upon the insights of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986) and the related Social Categorisation Theory (Tajfel et al. 1971; Turner et al. 1987; Turner 1985) to understand the relationship between the range of identities at play in the European Union and to analyse their effect on attitudes to European integration (Marcussen et al. 1999; Mols & Haslam 2008; Mols et al. 2009; Carey 2002; McLaren 2006; Lubbers 2008; Caporaso & Kim 2009; Hooghe & Marks 2008; Curley 2009; Genna 2009; Risse 2010).

Social Identity Theory and Social Categorisation Theory also inform the experimental literature upon which we draw. Billig, however, cautions against an overzealous embrace of these two theoretical approaches in relation to the study of national identities. He stresses also their limitations. Understanding identity in psychological terms, as an inner response to a motivational need for distinctiveness, may, he argues, narrow the focus of research unnecessarily. It may matter less how individuals categorise themselves, he argues, than how that 'category is categorised': members of a nationality thus also 'have to identify the identity of their own nation' (Billig 1995: 68).

This insight is particularly apposite for scholars of the EU. In practice, there is little consensus as to what attachment to the European Union means. Thus, 'when two individuals claim to "feel European", they might mean totally different things in terms of both the intensity of the feeling they describe and the imagined political community they refer to' (Bruter 2003: 1154). The very concept (Favell 2005) of EU identity and its objective

existence (Duschesne & Frognier 1995) have been questioned. EU identity is, at best, an 'identity in formation' (cf Laitin 1998).

In this contested identity landscape, the potential of the EU flag to promote a convergence in attitudes in the various member states is at the heart of many EU initiatives to promote a 'Peoples' Europe'. Coins, symbols, background flags, policy interventions and legal frameworks aim to provide constant daily reinforcement, at an unconscious level, of EU membership. In a similar manner, however, such symbols may act as a thorn in the side of some citizens. In this context, raising the salience of European Union membership may have differential effects on different groups of respondents according, for example, to their national context or to their pre-existing attachments, or otherwise, to the EU.

## **B. Existing research designs**

Empirical research on EU identity has been shaped significantly by the availability of large scale cross sectional survey data – such as the Eurobarometer series and the European Values Survey. These comparative surveys typically use closed questions that ask respondents whether they “feel close” to a number of groups, including “European Union citizens” (Eurobarometer 57.2) or what the EU “means personally” to each respondent (Eurobarometer 63.4). Similar questions appear in other major comparative survey programmes. Extensive analyses of these surveys have explored various determinants of

attachment to and support for the European Union (Gabel 1998; Anderson 1998; McLaren 2002; McLaren 2008; Ray 2003; Eichenberg & Dalton 2007; De Vries & Edwards 2009; Hobolt 2005; Lubbers 2008; Hooghe & Marks 2005, 2008; Green 2007; Fligstein 2008; Hooghe 2007; Steenbergen et al. 2007). We have a detailed knowledge of the extent to which individuals identify themselves as Europeans: a majority of respondents to Eurobarometer surveys now identify themselves at least as 'somewhat European' (Green 2007; Fligstein 2008). Scholars have also sought to identify the social and social-psychological characteristics of those who identify themselves as Europeans (Green 2007; Fligstein 2008), and how this type of identification might relate to support for European integration. However, self-reported identification as European in existing quantitative analyses cannot easily measure the unconscious or implicit aspects of identification with the EU, and their impact on public attitudes.

There is also a need to gain a deeper understanding of the every-day impact of the EU on the lives of its citizens and their perceptions of the EU (Favell 2005; Favell & Guiraudon 2009). Certainly, a growing qualitative literature (Marcussen et al. 1999; White 2010; Favell 2008; Gaxie et al. 2011) has enriched our understanding of how the EU is being conceived by the EU public. The importance of wider contextual factors is also increasingly recognised. The growing role played by elites in cueing public attitudes to the European Union (Ray 2003; Hellström 2008; Hooghe 2007; Hooghe & Marks 2005; Hobolt 2005; 2007) and vice versa (Steenbergen et al. 2007) has been shown. This is particularly evident as the public has come to rely more on 'cognitive shortcuts' in a complex decision environment (De Vries &

Edwards 2009). However, none of these approaches allows for a systematic measurement of contextual effects. What effect, for example, does exposure to EU symbols on a daily basis have on the responses of survey or focus group participants?

Bruter (2003) sought to redress this gap using experimental methods. In his innovative study, he explored the effect of EU symbols in association with positive and negative news reports about the EU. Participants were invited to participate in a study on the 'media and Europe'. He extended his approach, to explore the temporal effects of exposure, in a 2009 panel analysis of the time-bomb effect of news and symbols on political identity (Bruter 2009). Although the research design that we introduce in this chapter follows a similar rationale, respondents exposed to our various experimental cues were not presented with accompanying information on the EU or made aware that they were participating in a study on the EU (see Research Design below). This ensured that respondents did not elect to participate in our survey on the basis of pre-existing strong EU-related opinions (positive or negative). More importantly, this approach allowed us to test the impact of subliminal or *implicit* exposure to the different types of EU related cues employed, and in this manner, allowed us to draw on an emerging field of social psychological studies regarding the role of implicit visual priming.

## Experimental Approaches

The nature of unconscious associations and behaviours, provoked by exposure to national symbols, has been the subject of a growing body of experimental literature in the field of



political psychology. Scholars have demonstrated, for example, that subliminal exposure to visual images (for example, flashing a national flag on a computer screen for a few milliseconds) affects political preferences (Hassin et al. 2007, 2009; Kemmelmeier & Winter 2008; Ehrlinger et al. 2011). For instance, Hassin et al. (2007, 2009) and (Butz et al. 2007) measure the effects of subtle exposure to the Israeli and US flags, and how these flags activate existing attachments (positive or negative) among participants. Ehrlinger et al. (2011), meanwhile, found that US participants, implicitly exposed to the Confederate flag, were less willing to vote for Barack Obama and were more likely to view black candidates negatively.

Hassin et al. (2007) also found that subliminal exposure to the Israeli national flag had a homogenising effect on the political attitudes of individuals at extreme ends of the Israeli nationalist spectrum. However, it has also been demonstrated experimentally that the impact of national state symbols may have a polarising impact depending on existing identities. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, Gilboa & Bodner (2009: 19) found that adolescents, immigrants and particularly the ultra-religious Israelis were less likely to identify strong national associations with their national anthem. Butz (2009) also highlights the multi-referential nature of national symbols, which have the capacity to provoke division as well as cohesion. Sachs's (2009) study of national and Islamic identities in Indonesia, likewise, revealed the capacity for national symbols to provoke disunity and specifically to invoke discord amongst groups that felt disadvantaged within the national context.

### (i) Functional and Symbolic Visual Cues

The research design that we introduce here builds on the current experimental literature, but adds to it by distinguishing between two types of visual cues related to the EU. A key underlying assumption in the experimental literature reviewed above is that a symbolic image, such as a flag, acts as shorthand for a pre-existing narrative about national identity. Butz (2009:779) has, for example, argued that national symbols may provoke 'enhanced national identification and the promotion of group unity at an unconscious level'. Even in established nations, however, there may not in fact be one consistent 'national identity' narrative primed by such symbols. In the case of European Union identity, an 'identity in formation' (cf Laitin 1998), the existence of a consistent EU identity narrative primed by the EU flag is even less likely.

Europeanisation is, however, increasingly evident in daily reality – as reflected in personal and business relationships and travel and consumer trends (Diez Medrano 2008). There is a growing recognition that while few would 'die for Europe' (Smith 1995: 139) daily exposure to EU-related norms, symbols and practices is likely to play a role in shaping identification with and support for the European Union (for example: Cram 2001, 2009a; Bruter 2003; 2009; Trenz 2004, 2006; Priban 2009; Castiglione 2009; McNamara 2010; Manners 2011). As Billig (1995) has argued, the national flag is only one of the many daily reminders of belonging that citizens, even in established nations, encounter. For most EU citizens their relationship with the EU is largely based on daily low-level engagement with the EU in unremarkable ways (carrying passports

or driving licences, conforming with legislation, walking past EU flags) which remind citizens of their involvement in the larger EU system whether for good or ill. This context justifies a shift in focus from traditional heroic national-type symbols, such as flags, to include more banal everyday representations of the EU (see Cram 2001, 2012; Manners 2011). For this reason, our research design distinguishes between 'symbolic' and 'functional' visual cues.

## (ii) Affective and Instrumental Connotations

The research design detailed here introduces an additional dimension to the existing body of experimental studies, which tend to assume that national symbols are associated in memory with affective connotations. The issue of the nature of identity, and the relationship between sentiment and interest in forging feelings of belonging to a social category, has long been debated in the literatures on nationalism and national identity. The affective dimension of identity refers to the 'we' feeling or sense of belonging and to the sentimental attachment of an individual to a political unit. Many have focussed on the affective dimension of identity, on the importance of shared histories, values and language, of ethnic symbolism (Smith 1995) or the 'psychic income' (Kellas 1989) associated with a shared identity. Others, however, have recognised the functional (Deutsch et al. 1957) or practical (Gellner 1964), even instrumental (Brass 1979), elements implicit in the concept of identity.

Hooghe and Marks (2004, 2005, 2008) examine the relative roles of identity and economic rationality in driving public attitudes towards the European Union. Their conclusion is that, while identity may have the explanatory edge, economic interests and communal identities continue to interact with national institutions and are related to the cohesion of national elites in the different member states. The nature and meaning of the multi-level, multi-national EU is highly contested. Whether the EU is (or should be) an emerging community of peoples or simply a functional construct, designed to facilitate free trade, is a subject of significant controversy (Majone 2006). There is also a continuing gulf between the positive experiences of well-educated, mobile, professional elites (Fligstein 2008) or 'Euro-stars' (Favell 2008) in relation to European integration and the general indifference of the public (Ingelgom 2011). In this vein, we employ both *affective* and *instrumental* variables as our dependent variables, to measure different aspects of EU related opinions.

### (iii) Moderating National Differences

Significant resources are invested by EU institutions in 'communicating Europe'. The assumption that underpins these efforts is that displaying the EU flag has the potential to promote a convergence in popular attitudes to the EU in the various member states. Advertising the role of the EU, it is expected, will help to create a 'People's Europe' or to bring Europe 'closer to the people'. This strategy explicitly underpins, for example, the publicity commitments to which all recipients of EU structural funding must adhere.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the funding period 2007-13: Article 69 Council General Regulation 1083/2006 and Articles 2-10 of Commission Implementation Regulation 1828/2006.

However, the way in which the EU is 'framed' at the domestic level continues to play a key role in public perceptions of the European Union (Diez Medrano 2003). There is also considerable evidence that top down efforts to manufacture an EU identity may be 'filtered' and moderated by national domestic contexts (Checkel 2005; Radaelli 2002). Therefore, to understand what shapes attitudes towards the European Union, we must also understand the nature and complexities of the relationship between European Union identity and the range of national state identities and national sub-state identities with which it interacts.

The relationship between exposure to the EU symbols and European identity on the one hand, and national identities and contexts on the other may not necessarily be antagonistic. The work of Roccas & Brewer (2002) on multiple identity structures is a particularly helpful framework for understanding the relationship among such multiple group attachments (see also Stryker 2000; Citrin & Sears 2009). As individuals belong to different social groups at the same time (supranational, national, regional), they can define their self-concept by applying more than one potential group definition, often using 'hyphenated' self definitions – for example, Scottish-European. This complex conceptualization of the alternative possible arrangements among a range of group identities, along with a long line of social psychological scholarship (Tajfel 1974; Fiske & Taylor 1991; Huddy 2001) highlights the inadequacy of existing survey instruments to capture the variegated foundations of group attachments, more so in the case of EU identity. Identification as an EU citizen is typically held in parallel with identification as a national member. Also, in certain member states

such as the UK, there is a clear distinction between a singular national state identity and a host of national sub-state identities.

Following this logic, the comparative research design presented below draws participants from two different member states, Ireland and the UK, but also distinguishes within the latter among Scottish, British, English and Welsh identifiers. This multi-level stratification allows us to take into account contextual differences between member states and within member states.

### **C. An Empirical Application**

The research design described in this section is an attempt to synthesize these theoretical and analytic concerns: the inadequacy of cross-sectional surveys to capture contextual effects such as those hypothetically taking place during exposure to visual cues; the need for a closer look at the functional foundations of these effects, and the instrumental connotations that they prime; and the complicated relationship between supranational symbols and identities and national attachments.

Building upon the growing interest in cognitive shortcuts and the cueing of EU related attitudes (Ray 2003; Hooghe 2007; Hooghe & Marks 2005; Hobolt 2005; 2007; Steenbergen et al.), we used an online experimental approach to measure how being implicitly reminded

(by visual cues) of one's membership of the EU affected EU related attitudes. Specifically, our research design sought to examine the link between implicit exposure to EU related images, attitudes to the EU, and identification with the EU.

### Participant Selection and National Samples

During April 2011 we conducted a series of online survey experiments. The surveys were administered by YouGov (and its affiliate in Ireland), a British online opinion research organisation. YouGov recruits members for its opt-in panel (currently containing over 350,000 respondents) via a variety of methods, such as advertising campaigns on non-political websites and recruitment agencies. When conducting a survey, YouGov draws a sub-group from its panel of respondents by emailing them and asking them to follow an Internet link to the survey.<sup>2</sup> Typically research on flag effects has used homogeneous small samples - students or other small groups often studied in laboratory settings. In this case, the YouGov panel allowed us to use a demographically, geographically and nationally wider and more variegated sample of respondents.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.yougov.co.uk/about/about-methodology.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Our sample of 4350 respondents is much larger than those typically used in the literature. As a point of comparison, Bruter's (2009) six country comparison was unusually large for this experimental genre at N=1197.

The online experiments included participants who identified themselves as: English, Scottish, Welsh, British or Irish. Participation in each of the five samples was determined by individual responses to a previous online questionnaire, which included a national identity/attachment question (March 2011). The screening identity questions asked:

[If resident in the UK:] *"If you had to choose just one, which of the following words best describes the way you think of yourself?" [British/English/Scottish/Welsh/Other]*

[If resident in Ireland:] *"Many people think of themselves as being part of a particular nationality, for example as French or American or whatever. Do you think of yourself as Irish or as belonging to some other nationality, or do you not think of yourself in this way? I think of myself as..."[Irish/Another nationality/I don't think of myself in this way]*

Based on responses to the above question, participants were initially assigned into one of the five identity groups/samples: British, English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish. The five identity samples were similar in terms of interest in political affairs and educational attainment. They were also similar in terms of age, with the exception of the Irish sample, which was overall younger.

The Interaction of Symbols with Identity



The research was conducted in three steps, which were replicated for each national sample: the experimental manipulation (Step I); the measurement of the impact of the visual cue on EU-related attitudes and preferences (Step II); and the measurement of exogenous individual characteristics (Step III).

- I. Respondents were exposed to an implicit visual cue related to the EU (the control group received a neutral cue with the EU symbol removed). This cue was either symbolic (a flag on a public building) or functional (the EU symbol at passport control) (see images in Appendix).
- II. Measures of the consequences of implicit exposure in the form of survey questions on the instrumental and affective connotations of EU membership.
- III. Standard survey measures of attachment to the EU, which operationalised EU identity, and various demographic questions.

Step I in this experimental design represented an attempt to simulate real-life, contextual influences that shape group attachments. We used a naturalistic approach to deliver cues to respondents. Existing research has predominantly been conducted in University laboratories using student samples (see examples in Hassin et al. 2007; Ferguson & Hassin 2007; Kimmelmeier & Winter 2008). The naturalistic approach that we apply, in contrast, tries to recreate the conditions in which citizens encounter implicit cues, and therefore replicates real-life exposure (see images in Appendix).

Specifically, in April 2011 participants selected in the five identity samples were invited to take part in the main study, an online survey entitled “Social Trends Survey 2011”. The survey title was designed to make no reference to political issues/current affairs or to the EU, in order to avoid attracting participants that were either overly interested in politics or held strong opinions on the EU. Before completing a short online questionnaire, participants were presented with an introductory page. The introductory page contained the survey title (“Social Trends Survey 2011”), followed by a large photograph, which was in turn followed by instructions (see instructions in Appendix). The questionnaire that followed contained questions on the EU and, in the end, some personal questions (national/supranational attachments and demographics).

We used implicit exposure to the relevant images to accommodate a key finding of earlier studies; namely, that a range of social-psychological phenomena – including political behaviour, attitudes and identities - are informed by nonconscious, “gut” reactions that bypass cognitive awareness, and by extension the social desirability biases that may affect survey-based analysis (Hassin 2005). Regarding the visual priming, respondents from each of the five groups were randomly exposed to different versions of the same image. The random assignment of participants from the five national samples into experimental conditions allowed us to create control and treatment groups with equivalent characteristics in all variables apart from the experimental condition. Exposure to these images served as our key independent variable. Some participants were primed with implicit images of a key European symbol: the EU related image (treatment condition). The visual

cue was either symbolic (an EU flag presented in an abstract context) or functional (an EU symbol presented on a sign during airport passport control).

Step II measured the impact of the visual cue on EU-related attitudes and preferences or in other words, the consequences of stimulating EU related connotations through visual cueing. The responses of participants exposed to the EU related image were compared to the responses of participants who saw similar images that had the EU cue removed (control condition). We measured these consequences through participants' responses to standard survey questions that tapped individual reactions towards European integration. We expected that those exposed to the EU cue would respond differently to those exposed to the control cue.

Our aim was to document whether exposure to the EU related image had any impact - positive or negative - on EU-related opinions, compared to the control condition (no EU cue). We analysed the impact of implicit visual cues on two dependent variables. The variables were based on the first and second items in the online questionnaire. These two items appeared on the first screen (page), which immediately followed the introduction page that contained the photograph. The two questions replicated standard items used in existing surveys (Eurobarometers). The first item measured abstract or what we call "affective" attitudes towards the EU:

*“In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?” [Responses: Very Positive/Fairly Positive/Neutral/Fairly Negative/Very Negative]*

The second question asked about the practical or what we call “instrumental” benefits of the EU:

*“Generally speaking, would you say that [the UK / Ireland]\* benefits or does not benefit from being in the European Union?” [Responses: Greatly benefits/Largely benefits/Somewhat benefits/Benefits only a little/Does not benefit at all]*

\* UK residents read “the UK”; Irish residents read “Ireland”

In Step III, we asked respondents about their existing supranational attachments. This information helped us to evaluate whether these attachments moderated the effect of Step I (implicit visual cues) on the measures in Step II (EU related opinions), making the effect stronger or weaker for people with stronger or weaker attachments. In this part, we also asked various demographic questions.

The diagram below summarizes the design of our experiment:

*[Diagram about here]*

## Key findings

We found that exposure to the symbolic visual cue (a flag decorating a public building) did not affect respondents' opinions (either as a main effect or interacting with EU attachment). In other words, the symbolic image had a null effect, and it had the same (null) effect for a respondent that feels strongly attached to the EU and a respondent that feels weakly attached to the EU. On the contrary, the functional version of the EU image (presented during passport control), had a significant effect, which was not sensitive to the inclusion of various demographic controls. This effect was moderated by EU attachment (third column in Table 1). In particular, exposure to the functional image led those already attached to the EU to hold more pro-EU responses. Conversely, it led those not attached to the EU to hold more anti-EU responses. What further supports a 'functional' reading of EU support is that the aforementioned interaction effect was significant only with reference to the 'instrumental' responses: the airport image only affected opinions on the practical benefits of the EU. Our interpretation of these implicit – albeit weak - effects is that they highlight an instrumental/functional undercurrent in the role of EU symbols.

*[Table 1 about here]*

Drawing attention to domestic differences, these effects were only present among Scottish and Welsh respondents. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the direction of these effects in the two

samples. Using a simplified 0 (pro-EU) to 1 (anti-EU) scale, Scottish respondents that were already attached to the EU became more likely to have a *positive* opinion on the EU when exposed to the functional cue (EU sign during passport control) than those who did not see the cue at all. Scottish respondents that were not attached to the EU became more likely to have a *negative* opinion when exposed to the functional cue than those who did not see the cue at all.

*[Figures 1 & 2 about here]*

In summary, the application of this research design highlights the role of ‘functional’ rather than purely ‘symbolic’ EU related images. Findings also indicate that exposure to the visual cue activates instrumental connotations of the European Union rather than purely affective ones. These results differ from the findings of previous seminal research on implicit exposure to national images (e.g. Hassin et al. 2007), in which abstract versions of national symbols do shape affective reactions. In addition, contrary to existing findings on the homogenising effect of national flags (e.g. Hassin et al. 2009), we found that exposure to the EU ‘functional’ image led to polarisation of opinion. In particular, the effect varied according to the degree to which subjects were attached to the EU. Finally, implying a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between EU symbols and national identity, these effects were only applicable to the respondents of two nations (Scotland and Wales).

## **Conclusion**

The starting point for the research design presented in this chapter was the recognition that what is often neglected in the study of EU identity is the day to day, low-level, reinforcement of a shared consciousness. The role played by exposure to EU images - on coins, flags, driving licences and passports - on a daily basis in the process of learning to identify with the EU, merited exploration. Specifically, we wanted to find out the extent to which an unconscious normalisation of the messages transmitted by EU symbols had taken place. What messages were being transmitted, which groups were most affected and what factors moderated the responses of these groups?

We sought to establish whether particular visual reminders of the EU (functional or symbolic) carried a specific type of association with the European Union (instrumental or affective). The aim was to provide an insight into the extent to which EU symbols, from flags to more mundane reminders, have become associated in popular perceptions with a particular understanding of the role of the EU. We sought specifically to measure the extent to which symbols associated with the EU affect public attitudes towards the European Union.

The experimental method allowed us to gain insights unavailable through more traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches. The online approach, meanwhile, allowed us to

overcome a key critique of experimental research, the small  $n$  and the subsequently limited representativeness of this type of research (Castano 2004), by significantly increasing sample size and drawing from a more variegated pool of participants – in terms of social and national characteristics. In addition, our method closely represents the real-world scenario in which individuals are on a more or less daily basis exposed to images of the EU in newspapers, on posters and signs, on driving licences and passports. The research design described here can be applied to (or within) other EU member states, and to prospective member states. The design can also be adapted to examine the impact of different types of visual cues; to address different identity groups; to explore the effect of different contexts; and to measure different dependent variables, including behavioural responses.

@5450 words



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## Appendix

### I. The Experimental Images

Figure A1: Symbolic cue: EU treatment (symbol present)



Figure A2: Symbolic cue: Control (symbol absent)



Figure A3: Functional cue: EU treatment (symbol present)



Figure A4: Functional cue: Control (symbol absent)

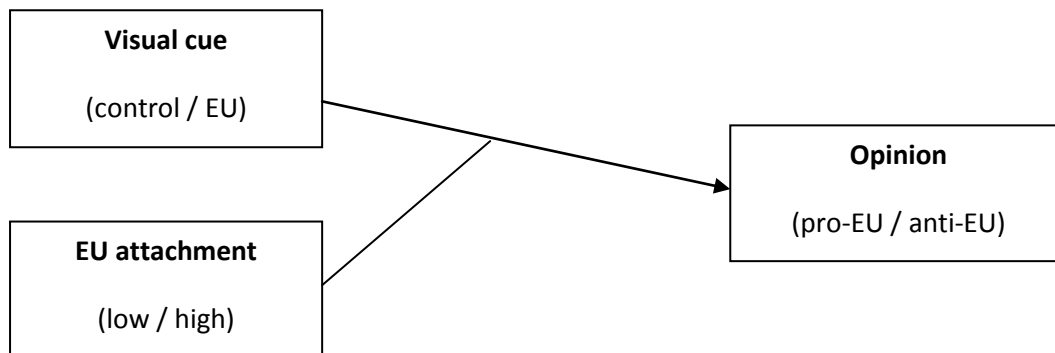


## II. Instructions to Participants

The experimental images were accompanied by this instruction: *'Please click on the photo above to proceed to the survey'*. To ensure that respondents paid at least some attention to the image, respondents could proceed to the survey only by clicking on the centre of the image. Respondents could not move backwards in the survey. Therefore there was no option for taking a second look at the image.



## DIAGRAM



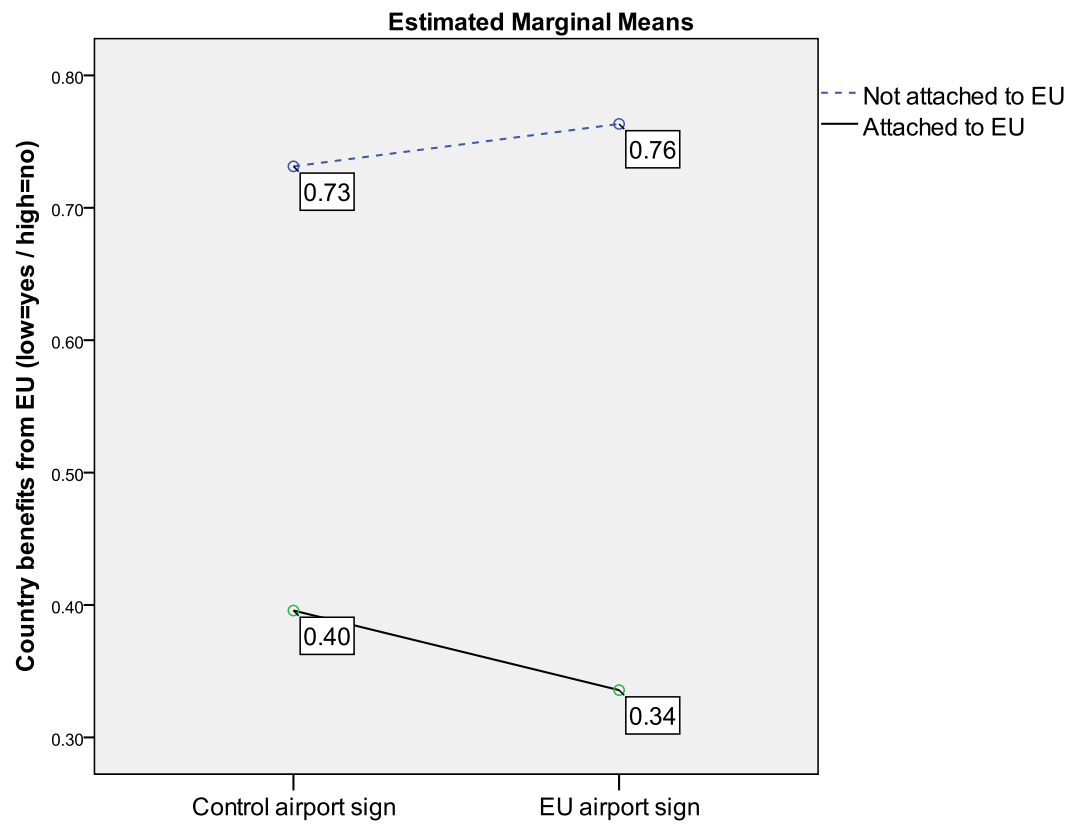
Note: Two versions of the cue variable were used (symbolic or functional visual cue). Similarly, two versions of the opinion variable were used (instrumental or affective opinion).

**TABLE 1.** *Functional image, EU attachment and instrumental responses*

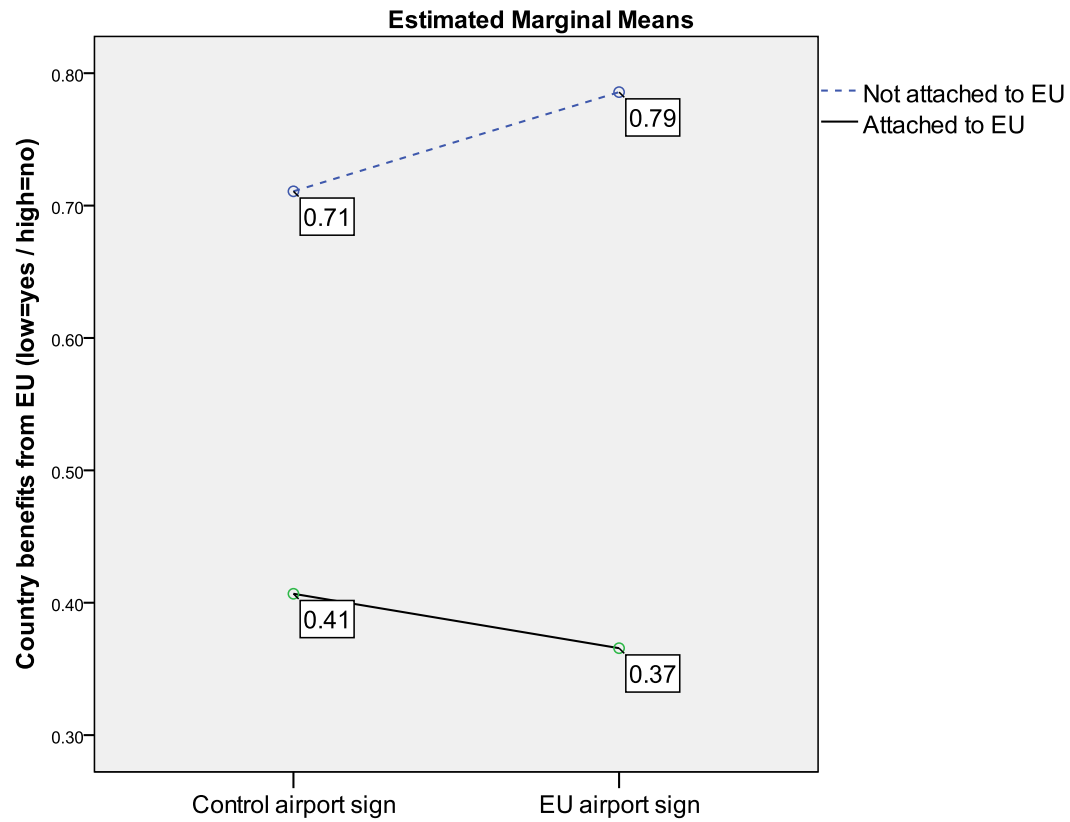
Sample (df)	F-ratios		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
	<i>EU sign at airport</i> (control / EU)	<i>EU attachment</i> (low / high)	<i>Interaction (1)*(2)</i>
<i>English</i> (1,489)	2.2	200.9*	1.6
<i>Scottish</i> (1,459)	0.4	312.2*	4.6*
<i>British</i> (1,441)	0.4	256.3*	0.3
<i>Welsh</i> (1,415)	0.5	224.9*	5.8*
<i>Irish</i> (1,383)	2.9	164.1*	0.7

Dependent variable: Nation benefits from EU membership

\*  $p < .05$



**FIGURE 1.** *The impact of the functional cue on instrumental responses by EU attachment (Scottish sample)*



**FIGURE 2.** *The impact of the functional cue on instrumental responses by EU attachment (Welsh sample)*